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Conservation and Recreation

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Dudgeon Lake wildlife area remains popular despite 2011 storm

Recovery continues at the popular Dudgeon Lake Wildlife Area on the north edge of Vinton. In 2011 the area was in the path of a storm packing Category 3 hurricane strength winds that caused extensive damage to buildings, powerlines and trees from east central Iowa to Illinois. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

It's been nearly eight years since the Derecho blew through Benton County, but the impact of that storm on Dudgeon Lake Wildlife Area is still easily visible off Hwy. 150. The popular 1,800-acre public area on the north edge of Vinton was in the path of the powerful storm packing 110-130 mile per hour winds, knocking down buildings, powerlines and trees on July 11, 2011.

“It probably knocked down a couple thousand trees in this area,” said Mark Vitosh, district forester for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Vitosh and wildlife biologist Steve Woodruff have been working to restore trees to the damaged areas of Dudgeon Lake and to improve the overall quality of the forest. The duo presented their forest stewardship plan at a public meeting in August 2018. The plan is available online at https://www.iowadnr.gov/Hunting/Places-to-Hunt-Shoot/Wildlife-Management-Areas/Forest-Stewardship-Plans

Dudgeon Lake Wildlife Area is heavily influenced by the Cedar River. The wildlife area is a mix of forest areas, a river oxbow, and a network of slough and upland habitats. Most of the land in the wildlife area is in the Cedar River floodplain and the majority of tree species on the area are tolerant of west soils – silver maple, cottonwood, boxelder, and green ash, with some spots of black walnut, bur oak, and Kentucky coffeetree.

The storm was particularly devastating to these mature timber stands. Vitosh said they are working to replace those damaged trees by creating open conditions that encourage natural regeneration and through targeted tree planting.

On the lowlands adjacent to the Cedar River, the increasing frequency of flooding has slowed the recovery. A few silver maple and Kentucky coffeetrees are returning on their own. While the progress is slow, if nothing was being done, this area would fill in with non-native invasive white mulberry, he said.

“It’s taking a little longer than I would like but that comes with life in a floodplain,” Vitosh said.

The story is a little different about a half mile to the north.

A number of islands rise a few feet above the floodplain and vary in size from one-half acre to 30-40 acres. These areas of higher elevation are just out of reach of the frequent floods and are more hospitable to red oaks, bitternut hickories, black walnuts, basswood and Kentucky coffeetrees – species not commonly found in floodplains. Having mast producing trees in a floodplain forest provides diversity and an important food source for wildlife.

Many of these mast producing trees are young and encouraging the success of these young hardwoods is also part of the forest stewardship plan.

As Vitosh mapped the timber stands he identified priority trees and marked adjacent competing trees for girdling, a technique where a tree receives two cuts about five inches apart around the trunk deep enough to kill it, but not deep enough to fell it. By eliminating the competition, the priority tree will receive additional sunlight from above, which promotes more growth and potentially future mast production.

The girdled trees are allowed to die standing which provides habitat for wildlife species such as woodpeckers. Most of the girdling was done in 2017 and the results are promising. More trees will be marked for girdling, and the battle will continue to eliminate invasive species such as white mulberry.

After hiking in for about a third of a mile, two surprised hen turkeys abandoned their search for food and hurriedly ran for cover. The road noise of Hwy. 150 had disappeared.

Wood ducks sound off at the sight of an intruder. The number of deer trails and beaver slides is impressive.

Dudgeon Lake Wildlife Area, on the road to recovery from a devastating storm, is still one of the wildest places in Iowa.

“Our goal here is to create favorable conditions to allow bottomland tree species to return, where wildlife and mushroom hunters can access the grounds, birders can walk through and enjoy, and we’re heading in the right direction,” Vitosh said.

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As monarchs migrate northward, experts ask Iowans to keep habitat in mind

AMES, Iowa – Monarch butterflies are fluttering this way, and, with some luck, they’ll be more plentiful than in previous years when they reach Iowa later this spring.

During the winter months, scientists observed the largest overwintering monarch population in Mexico since 2007, said Steven Bradbury, a professor of natural resource ecology and management at Iowa State University. Bradbury is urging Iowans to maintain existing summer breeding habitat in the months ahead in the hope that such efforts throughout the Midwest can help sustain future monarch populations.

Monarch butterfly numbers have dropped sharply in recent years, in part due to a corresponding loss of summer breeding habitat. In 2013, the plight of the monarchs became so dire that scientists worried a single harsh winter could collapse the species’ continental migration, Bradbury said. But ideal weather conditions last year fueled a rebound.

Monarch butterflies migrate to the same forested area in central Mexico every winter. Measuring the area of forest canopy occupied by the butterflies gives scientists a convenient way of estimating the size of the population. The butterflies covered fewer than 2.5 acres in the winter of 2013-2014, the population’s lowest point in the last two decades. Last winter, however, the butterflies covered nearly 15 acres, which means a large population of butterflies is now migrating into the southern United States. As long as the weather remains favorable, Iowans can expect to see an abundant monarch population beginning in late May or early June, Bradbury said. He said maintaining that 15-acre mark consistently would put the species on much stronger footing when faced with a harsh winter in Mexico and other extreme weather events in the United States that could threaten the species.

The Iowa Monarch Conservation Consortium, a diverse partnership of 45 organizations supported by Iowa State University, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, is spearheading an effort to plant between 480,000 and 830,000 acres of new habitat by 2038. As part of ongoing

outreach and education statewide, the Iowa Monarch Conservation Consortium encourages Iowans to follow best practices to maintain existing monarch habitat. Large and small habitat patches – including field edges, public parks, and roadsides – are critical to provide habitat connectivity across the landscape, Bradbury said, as is the responsible use of pesticides.

The consortium encourages the planting of new habitat that includes native forbs and milkweeds, the only plant species on which monarchs lay eggs and the only plant species monarch larvae eat. Establishing new habitat is essential to supporting the long-term recovery of the monarch population.

“Iowa is perfectly situated to lead the way in conservation efforts for the monarch butterfly. Since Iowa is located within the monarch’s core breeding range, every patch of milkweed habitat added here counts toward national monarch conservation efforts,” said Bruce Trautman, acting director of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “The recovery cannot succeed without Iowa.”

The consortium is working with municipalities as well as farmers to expand the amount of monarch habitat in the state. Bradbury said agricultural involvement is crucial because much of Iowa’s private lands are devoted to agriculture.

“You can’t get to Iowa’s target without a significant commitment of the non-crop land that’s part of the agricultural landscape,” Bradbury said.

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Iowa DNR has another successful netting season for walleye

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources’ (DNR) spring fish spawning season is over and Iowa’s two walleye hatcheries are filled to capacity. Netting crews collected enough walleye to produce 1,082 quarts of walleye eggs at the Spirit Lake hatchery and 963 quarts at the Rathbun hatchery.

“Our goal was to collect 1,668 quarts of walleye eggs to produce 148 million walleye fry that we can stock in Iowa lakes,” said Jay Rudacille, DNR Warm and Coolwater Fish Culture supervisor. “We collected 2,045 quarts which is 22 percent more than our goal.”

Walleyes were caught at Clear Lake, East Okoboji Lake, Rathbun Lake, Spirit Lake, and Storm Lake from April 6-15. During this busy season, a total of 5,825 walleyes were collected, with about 61 percent of them being females. This combined effort collected more than 272 million eggs.

Fisheries staff netted over 2,400 walleyes on Big Spirit Lake and East Okoboji Lake in four nights. Roughly 70 percent of the walleyes caught were female. DNR test net crew set nets behind the hatchery in East Okoboji on April 8.

“In a single run, they captured a total of 316 walleyes, of which, 270 were females,” said Kim Hawkins, Spirit Lake Fish Hatchery manager. “This was a large catch for one boat.”

The Spirit Lake Hatchery also cultures muskie and northern pike. DNR personnel collected 118 muskies to provide eggs for hatching to raise fish to 12 inches. Northern pike were netted from sloughs and fish traps surrounding Big Spirit Lake, producing 1.2 million fry.

“We collected over 473 quarts of eggs this year from Storm Lake,” said Ben Wallace, DNR fisheries biologist. “This year ranks fourth in number of quarts of eggs collected from Storm Lake since 1988.” Netting efforts at Storm Lake lasted for seven nights.

Anglers will find larger fish in Storm Lake compared to past years.

“We have a large size class of 21- to 23-inch fish that’s been producing a lot of eggs,” said Wallace. “Some of those fish have moved out of the slot limit and anglers can now take advantage of some of them.”

With little natural reproduction by walleye in Iowa, walleye populations rely heavily upon stockings. Walleyes are stocked throughout Iowa into natural lakes, interior rivers, flood control reservoirs, and selected larger man-made lakes.

The DNR plans to release more than 148 million walleye fry in late April and early May. While the majority of walleyes are stocked as fry, some are cultured in Iowa DNR hatcheries and stocked at different sizes. More than 1.2 million two-inch walleyes are expected to be stocked into lakes, rivers, and streams across the state this summer. Larger 6-9 inch fingerlings (more than 340,000) will be stocked in lakes later this fall.

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Six things paddlers may not think about when heading to the water

1. It takes several weeks of sunshine and warm temperatures to warm the water in rivers and lakes after spring arrives. Snow melt, cool temperature and overcast skies keep water cold long after winter is officially over. Hypothermia is a real possibility in early spring and fall.
2. Rainfall and snow melt in the watershed can cause river levels to increase and create strong current.
3. Lifejackets, boats and gear need to be inspected each spring after sitting all winter. Check for broken zippers and buckles, holes and cracks in boats and split blades on paddles.
4. A lifejacket can do no good if it’s not worn. It is not rescue device designed to be thrown to someone in distress. Putting on a life-jacket while in the river is extremely difficult if not impossible.

5. Paddling when rivers levels are low can be safe and enjoyable, but remember to add on extra time in your trip planning because walking may be involved. Walking boats can be tiring. Plan to bring plenty of water for staying hydrated and be alert for any hazards in the stream bed can become dangerous.
6. Always file a float plan. A float plan can be as simple as letting a family member know what time you are going and expected back and where you are putting in and taking out. In case of emergency, others need to know how to find you. Cell phones can't always get a signal and could get damaged by water.

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